

Richard Peck

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“The most important secret of writing . . . you are only as good as your opening line,” revealed Richard Peck to a crowd of people definitely past the age of the group for which he writes. Richard Peck is a native of Decatur, Illinois, and he attended the University of Exeter in England and DePauw University. He is a magnificent writer, but what motivated him to leave his steady job as a teacher in 1971 for the unpredictable life of a writer? Most of the suburban parents who wear beige business suits and drive sedans to an office job Monday through Friday might say he is just one of those guys who burn-out halfway into life. A lot of young readers beg to differ. Most of those parents do not truly understand their kids and are not happy with their careers.

Richard Peck preaches literacy to a generation that completely rejects it. He says, “I am a writer because my mother read to me.” Working parents, broken families, teenage mothers—they don’t have time to read to their children. The result is an ignorant generation. Children my age can operate computers with deceptive ease, but many cannot read above the fourth grade level. Peck said, “Much is decided in those first five years.” When your parents are too busy, when your parents are too high, when your parents are workaholics who had children because it was “in,” those first five years make you a “couch potato,” and illiterate teenager, a middle-aged slacker, a drone lost in the system. Peck decided he would do his best to make the ignorant, yet arrogant nation, a little smarter, a little more imaginative.

Maybe Richard Peck decided that kids were lonely and lost; maybe he decided that he was one of those who should provide guidance to all the poor middle-class children. In his autobiography, Anonymously Yours, and Invitations to the World, Peck states that middle-schoolers like to read about characters about two years older than themselves. “All fiction is about how people change,” he explains. He writes to the kids on one side of puberty from the other, like a beam of hope that says, “Look at all the old people—one hundred four, ninety-three—others have lived through this and so can you.” Real life is too unlikely for fiction,” he said. If the only stories in the world were biographies, depression would be pandemic. Fiction is made-up so people laugh at the characters, get away from the real world, and learn a lesson sometimes in the middle. “Fiction could be truer than fact and more interesting,” he stated. Fiction is the equivalent of a volcanic eruption. Both of them relieve tension, except the volcano keeps earth from bursting with excess molten material, and fiction relieves a more emotional tension. The books Richard Peck writes are meant to be the shoulder to cry on and the surrogate parent from which to learn.

Language is a complement with a sting in its tail. If you understand it, grasp it, and use it well—congratulations. But if you remain in the dark, language can ruin you. “If you cannot use language,” warned Richard Peck, “it will be used against you.” Peck is trying to keep today’s children from being tomorrow’s illiterate fools, and the current society is not helping. Never is ADD or ADHD mentioned in a Laura Ingalls Wilder book. Today, these disorders are popping up and claiming many under the age of twelve as their victims. It is as if these problems arise out of nowhere. Coincidentally, they arrived at the same time that suburbs with schools that have low standards became

popular. Back in the good old days when parents were parents and children were seen and not heard, hyperactivity was not allowed. Peck complains in an amused voice, perhaps to his mother sitting in the audience, “I wanted to be hyperactive too, but Mother wouldn’t let me.” Between schools who do not expect much of the students attending them and parents hardly ever at home, many high schoolers end up struggling with average reading material. Instead of trying to whip those students into shape, the curriculum is dumbed down to accommodate everyone. This would be okay if everyone had a mediocre reading level, but they do not. Students are not challenged or given a chance to try. Maybe they would love literature if they read books for their age. Maybe all of their grades would rise if they were challenged in English class. Maybe, if they would feel the same about reading as Richard Peck does: “I warmed my face at the story’s light, hoping it wouldn’t end.” But all students are not given that chance. Peck is just trying to redeem them, save them from a lifetime of ignorance.

So why did Richard Peck give up the stable, organized, and predictable life of a teacher? He realized how much more he was needed in a different way, and how little he was helping where he was. Teachers cannot teach without good books appropriate for the age level. Peck saw a need, filled it, and in doing so, he has written over 30 books, had four of them made into movies, won several awards—the Newbury Medal, National Humanities Medal, the Margaret A. Edwards Award, the National Council of Teachers of English/ALAN Award—and received a lifetime library card to the library in Jacksonville, Illinois. So, he decided to take a risk, and it paid off. Children need guidance. Richard Peck, who continues to write from his home in New York City, gave up his security and scheduled paycheck to be the anonymous father and teacher to millions of lost children;

his newest novel, Here Lies the Librarian, carried on his tradition of bringing a point home using historical fiction and humor. [From “Best-selling author to speak at UIS,” State Journal-Register, Oct. 27, 2002; Richard Peck, Anonymously Yours; Richard Peck, “Arrow Author Book Report,” Arrow Book Club Oct. 2005; Richard Peck, Invitations to the World; Richard Peck, “Preparing the Literate for Change” speech, Springfield, University of Illinois at Springfield, Ill.; and Richard Peck, Speech, Illinois College, Jacksonville, Ill. Sept. 20, 2005.]